

Claire Darmstadter

Hey everybody, I am so lucky to be joined today by Rebecca Sawyer, Second Language Acquisition PhD student at UW Madison, and Spanish language educator. Thanks so much for taking a couple minutes to chat with me.

Rebecca Sawyer

Yeah, no problem.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, so it'd be great. If you could first just give us a really broad overview of your educational and linguistic background and how you arrived here in Wisconsin.

Rebecca Sawyer

Oh, gosh, yeah, it's a little winding. So I actually started off thinking I was going to be a music teacher. At Michigan State, I decided that wasn't for me and switched to Spanish. So I got my Spanish degree in teacher certification through Michigan State. Then I spent the next six years teaching high school Spanish in a district outside of Detroit. I'm from Michigan originally. Pretty challenging teaching situation. You know, demographic details are always a little bit funky. They're a little reductive, but for purposes of sort of figuring out what it was like, my district was 80% free and reduced lunch, so fairly high poverty, unusually racially diverse. Because Detroit, like many cities, the area's very segregated. So the fact that we had a very diverse school was kind of unusual. So I taught Spanish one and two, and then later on added four and AP, one year in particular teaching 1, 2, 4, and AP, which was a very busy year. After four years in the classroom, I decided I wanted to get my master's. So I got my master's in language learning at Wayne State. So I was teaching for two years while I was doing that master's. After I had my son, I decided doing a Master's teaching full time and having a baby was a bad idea. So I got a TA position at Wayne State teaching Spanish while I finished up my masters. And during that time, I decided that I really wanted to investigate what was happening in the classroom more. I was seeing that there was a lot of separation between what I knew about language acquisition research and what was happening in a lot of classrooms. And despite being trained in a more communicative style of teaching, in my undergraduate experience, it felt like a battle to actually teach that way. To the extent that me and my colleagues at my high school created our own curriculum, but we had to get the go-ahead to not involve the second high school in our district, because they were so against changing anything about their approaches. Yeah, so now I'm here at Wisconsin doing my PhD. It's the first year so it's that whole process of learning a whole ton and unlearning some things. And I actually, I'm not sure why it was on the SLA website. But I looked at my profile, and the way I described my research from August is already totally different for how I would describe it now. So I'm interested in what goes on in the classroom, but particularly I become interested in how there's these different Spanishes that we use. You know, there is the foreign language setting, which is what I come from in teaching. And even within that setting, there's choices that are made about what kind of Spanish is taught. But then Madison's particularly interesting because we have a fairly large population of Latino folks, Spanish speakers. So you have both more traditional ESL classes, but then they also have the dual language immersion program. So you have all of these different things happening at once.

I'm really interested in the meaning students are making of that I'm interested in how they're using Spanish in different capacities. So I'm not sure what that will look like necessarily yet, but that's where my interests lie. So not so much on the really formal linguistics, drawing syntax trees, and you know, phonological assessment. All of that's very interesting, but it's probably not where my research is gonna go.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, well, that was a great segue into the first thing I wanted to talk about and then we can talk a little bit more about your background. So if I understand correctly, you're specifically kind of focused on students who might be in one or more ways marginalized. And language can certainly be an area where this happens, especially for heritage speakers. So we may be able to kind of work more with proficiency and growth and kind of like you're talking about with the kind of changed high school curriculum and younger grades, but in high school, university settings, it's kind of like that pushback you're talking about, it's a lot harder, because we are so programmed to think about grades above everything. And it's sometimes really hard for students to kind of separate the goal of language programs from that grade. That is a very driving factor for a lot of our motivation in classes. So could you talk a little bit just a bit about how you celebrate language diversity while also kind of balancing the certain forms and skills and all those things needed to obtain a grade and to you know, reach a position where someone's gonna look at your skills and say they're formalized. We can use you in a formal setting and how you, you know, keep that pressure off, while also recognizing that it's a factor for a lot of kids.

Rebecca Sawyer

Yeah, it's really difficult and one of the things that's been interesting now that I've switched here to Wisconsin in different contexts is in Michigan, there's a foreign language requirement. So you have to have two years of a foreign language experience, and they define experience fairly broadly, to be able to graduate high school. So that already is totally different, because you get everyone. And for better or for worse, students still have this idea that Spanish is easy. So they end up deciding to do Spanish, as opposed to here, that's not the case, it's still totally an elective. And what I've noticed is that then Spanish gets turned into this, like, sort of way of elevating your status to make you look better for college applications, or it will make you more appealing in the job market eventually. So that's hard, because, you know, that's the motivation then to learn, and it's not for engaging in another culture or learning different perspectives. So that's sort of the first uphill battle. And even in Michigan, where it's a requirement, there's that idea too. It's like, okay, I have to learn a language, so I'll choose the one that's going to be most useful in theory. So there's that first is getting them over that mindset. And a lot of them don't to be quite honest. Especially if they only do a year or two, usually, it's kind of this process that happens. I was so lucky in my teaching context, that we got to do our own curriculum. So our main focus was to make sure that students were seeing the diversity of people that speak the language. I had a very eye opening experience within my first year. I mean, your first year is always just so rough. But I had a student, she was getting really frustrated, and I was trying to help her. And then in frustration, she said, *Well, you know, black people don't speak Spanish.* And I was like, well, I know that's not true. Ah, okay, I've goofed up because you have not seen

people that look like you speaking Spanish, when in fact they do. So having that experience, and then taking a closer look at the curriculum, and realizing that it's still just really white-centric. There's so many historical reasons for that too, going way back to the beginning of the 20th century, and Spanish was so stigmatized, even then. So the field was just fighting for recognition and saying Spanish is worthwhile. And what I've started to see in my readings, as I think was one, they wanted to distance Spanish from the speakers that are in the United States; it's a foreign thing. So it's not going to, you know, challenge the American dominant monolingual hegemony that we have, but then also have some associated more with upper class, white and European varieties of Spanish. So that's sort of where that field even now is. So that's the first thing is showing that, yeah, there are a whole bunch of different people that speak Spanish, it's not just these particular people, and that's a little bit easier to do culturally, because you can show a whole bunch of different diverse practices and products, and then you can get perspectives from that. And I realized that I'm speaking very like from the actual standards right now. But what's hard is when you look at varieties of Spanish, and if I could go back to when we were creating our curriculum, I think I would make different choices. But at the time, I just didn't know as much about language varieties, like I did, you know, I know they speak differently in these different places and a few of the different features. And I tell my students that I didn't have as deep of an understanding, I'm starting to get more of that now. Honestly, I think right now, my choice would be to lean towards teaching a variety that's more like what Spanish speakers in the United States speak. What's hard, though, is that it is stigmatized, so then you run into, is this going to help or harm them? Is it going to help them make connections to the community that's already here? Is that going to ding them when they're speaking? Say if I'm teaching high school, and that's how I teach them to speak, then they go into the university and university professors are still largely either people from Spain. Yeah, I mean, you can even look at like, you know, you look at any college, really, and the professors are either from Spain, or they are second language learners, like people like me that are teaching it then and not exclusively, obviously. But it still is predominantly that. So then are they going to have professors who are judging them for using that variety, like heritage language learners often are judged when they get to the university, and then being told that it's wrong, it's incorrect. So there's a lot of prescriptivism that's still there. And that's what's hard is balancing the sort of activism versus what's going to be ultimately helpful for the students.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, for sure. I'm taking a class on that right now. And it is so real, that tension that you want to reflect how language is spoken, but you also realize that there are larger structures that students are working within. I'd love if you can maybe just kind of talk a little bit about what it's like in general in the Ph. D. program. So you talked about you're kind of early on in the process, but I don't think people always understand exactly how it works. So are you taking classes? Are you taking classes outside of language, outside of second language acquisition? What is kind of a day in the life or a week in the life? Or what does it kind of look like for you?

Rebecca Sawyer

It's a lot of reading. So for most PhD programs, I don't want to say totally, I can say probably within the social sciences and humanities, your first few years are taking classes, gaining

knowledge. And then once you've taken the required number of classes or required number of credits. There's some kind of examination. Prelims for my program are two papers that you have to write. You're given two different topics, one's typically more general about stuff and second language acquisition. One is that more specifically related to your research interests, and you do these two papers. Then after that, you go through the process of writing a proposal for your dissertation, get that approved, and actually write the things. That's sort of I think, the main difference between, so the dissertation that you write is the main difference, I think, between, say, a master's and a PhD, because some master's programs will have you write a thesis, but it's not as long, it's not as intensive. It's just a, I don't want to say rigor, that's the wrong word. Of course, the rigorous, it's just less, I would say, expansive, maybe a little less in depth too, just because you have more knowledge also. And the other main difference between doing a master's and definitely compared to being an undergrad, and a PhD, is that when you're an undergrad, and when you're getting a master's degree, you're still for the most part consuming knowledge. So you're learning stuff, you're gaining more knowledge. The switch, once you're in a PhD program is that you're then expected to produce knowledge. And that's hard, because then suddenly, you're in this, like, you're still learning things. So you're a novice in some ways, but then there's an expect, there's an increasing expectation of being an expert in the field with the goal that by the time you get to the dissertation, defend it, you are the expert in this area, this is your thing, you can go and teach other people about this. So it feels like more pressure. What I've noticed in my classes, and because of the nature of my program, SLA, it touches a lot of different areas. So there's not a ton of specific SLA courses, I am taking one right now that is advanced second language acquisition. But we take courses in linguistics, we take courses in curriculum and instruction, we take courses in our specific languages. So actually I think this semester is a very good indication of the things we take. So I'm taking a qualitative methods course because you have to take methods courses. I am taking the advanced SLA course, and I'm taking a class in second language Spanish phonology, which is very interesting. And then I'm also taking a class that is a seminar that is bilingual policy, and how that's been constructed throughout essentially the whole last century. So very diverse. And sometimes what's challenging is taking those classes, especially ones that aren't quite as aligned with my research interests, and thinking, how can I take what's in this class and apply it to what I'm interested in? And how can I take what's in here and maybe write a final paper or do a project that's going to ultimately align towards that dissertation? As opposed to in my master's for final projects, I'd be like, oh, this sounds interesting. I think I'll do this. I wrote a project proposal for a psycholinguistics class that was looking at how, if you have more words in your lexicon to describe colors, does that impact how good you are at distinguishing color by using the phone game Blendoku It's a study I have never going to do. But you know, I was playing the game Blendoku and I was like, ah, we've talked about color perception in this class. That sounds fun. I could in theory do things like that in my PhD, but it's not going to be as useful for me.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah. Oh my gosh, that sounds fascinating. I would love to participate in that study.

Rebecca Sawyer

Also don't take four classes. This semester. I'm on a fellowship. So I'm not actively teaching as a TA. So I was like, Oh, I could add another class. And yeah, don't do that for classes. at any level, but especially at the PhD level, so I'm not doing that again.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, I can imagine. I picked up one thing you said in there was your focus on bilingual policy, and you're in a second language acquisition program. So knowing that many students are trilingual, or they speak more than two languages. Does that figure it all into your research into your study? Do you guys address that at all? Or how does that kind of blend with your work?

Rebecca Sawyer

Kind of, I would say in general, as some people will call it I three, or just additional languages. It's a bit of a newer area of research just overall whether you're coming from bilingual education or if you're coming from SLA. So that's part of it is that it's a new area, not a new phenomenon. Obviously, it just hasn't been addressed as much in the literature. So I think that's why you don't see it addressed in classes quite as much. And that gets into there's a whole lot of arguments within the field about you know, what do we call this stuff? Do we call it code switching? Do we call it translanguaging? So we even call it bilingualism? Why are we second language acquisition? Isn't it additional languages that we're learning? Is it acquisition? Or is it learning? So you have all these sort of, I don't know if I'll say arguments, but these discussions about what we should call things. It's tricky too, because typically, when we're talking about what's happening in schools, it primarily is bilingualism, there still aren't a ton of students that are speaking three languages. And as it relates to my research, I think where I see it coming up isn't so much three languages, but I'm interested in the different varieties that are used. So for instance, you know, you have students who speak a non-standard variety of English, but they also know the standard variety and have to use the standard variety in schools. And then you also have them learning Spanish, or the flip side of that. You have students who grew up speaking Spanish, well, actually even more with them, they grew up speaking Spanish, most likely a non-standard, right, because standard, it doesn't really exist, go to school, learn a standard English variety in the classroom, but are also learning non-standard varieties depending on where they are from their classmates and interactions in the community. And then if they take Spanish courses, whether it's designed for heritage language learners or not, they're going to be exposed to and be learning the standard form. So that's, I think, where I'm more interested in how these and that's, you know, it's inaccurate terminology to say standard, but that's kind of what we have to describe it, how these different standard and non-standard varieties interact within the language learning process too.

Claire Darmstadter

And so then once you finish this program, and I know this is sometimes a scary question for undergrads and adults and everyone alike, do you have any idea of maybe what direction you want to go in after that, and one thing that's kind of interesting, I've kind of been, I don't know, thinking a lot about is I've been chatting with some people who are non-native speakers of the language they're studying. And they've talked about how pursuing a PhD gives them legitimacy in the eyes of the parents of other students or other individuals where maybe subconsciously,

their kind of rationale for pursuing a PhD or a higher education degree is that it's going to make them feel more qualified when they're speaking with individuals who may be a first speaker of the language so can you kind of talk about why you went into this program, and you talked a little bit about that before, but just kind of what you're thinking of doing after completing it?

Rebecca Sawyer

Yeah, as far as the gaining confidence piece, I don't know. Like, I am never going to sound like someone who grew up speaking, this is their first language, I started learning when I was 14, you know, so as much as the critical period is problematized, in a lot of ways, I was still quite a bit older, it's just that much harder to gain these different features. Some people say you can't ever gain certain features, and I'm not, you know, in areas where I'm exposed to as much of the language I had a fairly short study abroad experience. I kind of just say, oh, your bilingualism you know, like, that's, that's sort of my attitude, and has been my attitude for a bit. And to some extent, it helps learners also because I can say, Oh, hey, this is something that I'm using. Did you catch that? I did that, because that's something that isn't what a native speaker would do. For me, I don't really know where I'll go. And some of it honestly depends on like, personal family factors. Are we going to end up wanting to stay in Madison? Are we going to want to move back to Michigan? What is my husband's job gonna look like? So some of that, you know, it doesn't necessarily have to do at all with what I'm interested in and what I want to do, but it's just life impacting these choices also. But I think the benefit of my program is that I could see myself going in a lot of different directions. You know, I think a lot of people go into it, thinking, you know, they'll be a tenured professor at a big, you know, R1 research university. And that's not necessarily my goal. I guess if it happens, cool. To some extent, I think I would feel a little bit more happy if I was a professor at a school that was less focused on research and more focused on teaching. But I could see myself going a lot of different directions. There's plenty of opportunities within the private sector that people need. People that understand languages and to design teaching modules. There's positions within government too if I wanted to do that, or if I am really over academia, I could also end up right back in a high school Spanish classroom. That is always an option for me, as long as I keep my cert up, so probably not. But maybe I could end up in a maybe a curriculum coordinator position like that in a K-12 district also. So the world is my oyster, essentially and it'll, you know, depending on the economy, and what jobs are out there, too. There's a lot of different factors like that. But I actually like that I have so many options, because one thing that I started to feel with teaching is that I was like, okay, I'm teaching Spanish 4 and AP, I'm also the department head, there's not a lot of other places I can go. And certainly you can grow in your practice in what you do in teaching. But as far as taking on more responsibilities, I could go into admin, but I had no desire to be an assistant principal or a principal, that's just not what I wanted to do. Just dealing with the discipline and the parents, Oh, my gosh, way too much. So that sort of feeling like I didn't have anywhere to go after that as part of the motivation for getting the PhD and opening up more opportunities for myself also. And ultimately, wherever I end up, I just want to make language teaching better, I want to make it more inclusive, I want to incorporate diverse perspectives, and kind of help to chip against these ideas of standardization and native, this all these things that are sort of problematic within our field.

Claire Darmstadter

So the last piece we'll touch on, you've already so you shared so much valuable insight. You're also a parent. Can you talk a little bit about your views on raising a bilingual child, how rigidly planned or purposeful language development is? And do you have any thoughts on perhaps school programs in the Madison area that you might want or you might not want to enroll your child in?

Rebecca Sawyer

Yeah, so it's complicated. So I decided very early on that I was not specifically going to do -- because if you want to raise your kid bilingual, those sort of best practices that have one speak in one language and one of the other, I don't speak a native variety of Spanish, though. And I also just don't use language that way. And also, the cultural connection just isn't there, I don't have a culture that is connected to that language. So to some extent, it felt very artificial to do that. I'll speak in Spanish with him. We have books that are in Spanish that I'll read to him. He's funny, though, I think where he's at with his — he's going to be three soon, where he's at with his English development, he gets a little frustrated if I speak Spanish, because he knows I speak English. He wants me to speak English, because he understands that and it's already hard enough that you know, his little brain is trying to figure out this first language and oh, you're throwing another language into that. So he's funny, he'll sometimes like he'll hand me a book and say no Spanish, like, Okay, I won't speak in Spanish. It's pretty funny. Right? Now, it's kind of nice that at his daycare, which has been so fraught, even deciding to do daycare during the pandemic, one of the teachers is a Spanish speaker from Colombia. So that's pretty cool, because she'll speak in Spanish with them. And there's a few kids at this daycare here also, that are from Spanish speaking families. So he's gotten a lot of exposure to it. I'm not sure what I'm going to do about his elementary school because he is going to do kindergarten and probably first grade also here. I really believe in kids going to their neighborhood schools. And we actually are within walking distance of the one he'd be zoned to. It doesn't have one of the dual language immersion programs. And it's hard because I would like him to do that. And I am a Spanish speaker myself, so it doesn't feel weird, or as weird to want him to do that. Because I'm yeah, we can communicate in both languages together. But what's happened in Madison, what happens in a lot of dual language programs is that you get this kind of funky interest convergence, where you do have Spanish speakers that you know, it's the dual program, so they're speaking Spanish and learning English. But then the kids that are English speakers to learn Spanish, they end up being fairly privileged kids that get in these programs. And if you look at enrollments in Madison, it is not just Madison, I do want to say also, it's a lot of places where you have DLI programs. The students that are there are overwhelmingly white and middle or upper middle or upper class. So you get this kind of tracking program that happens with DLI, you get this separation between who's in that program and who's not. And that's actually one of the things I'm interested in once they get to high school what those attitudes are like then. So I haven't made a decision yet. I'll probably end up talking with some of my colleagues and professors who have kids in the district too. So I'll probably just have more conversations with them. And I mean, he's gonna be fine no matter what he has for his education because he has a mom who is getting a PhD and his dad who also has a college degree like, this kid's gonna be fine. I'm not worried about his educational outcome and I

actually am very skeptical of parents that you know, act like every single decision is so important, they have to maximize the potential for the kid because I don't know, I just want him to grow up and not be a jerk and be happy, you know, I don't need to maximize every single decision I make for him. So, we'll see. I have some complicated thoughts about dual language immersion, which is going to impact if I ultimately decide to put them in the lottery or not.

Claire Darmstadter

Well, thank you for that candid perspective, because I feel like people don't always talk about that. And that's super important. The last question and then I'll let you go. So we tell little kids and adults all the time that speaking more than one language is a superpower. So can you give me one reason in English, in Spanish, a mix of two, whatever you want, why it's a superpower to speak more than one language?

Rebecca Sawyer

Oh, es un superpoder. Hm, depende. Um, I would say it's a superpower because it allows you to, it just expands who you can communicate to. It's a superpower because it lets you get an insight into a perspective that's different from yours. I would say that's... yeah.

Claire Darmstadter

Well, thank you so much. I appreciate all your time, all the thoughts you had to share and hope you have a great rest your school year and you can manage all those four classes on top of everything in your life.

Rebecca Sawyer

So far, I'm doing it so hopefully that is the case.